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Splitting Attraction: A Phenomenological Study of Coming Out With Discordant Sexual and Romantic Orientations Among Adults

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2024

Abstract

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MS, Johns Hopkins University, 2012

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In discussions of attraction, most assume that one term applies to both sexual and romantic attraction and thus is all that one needs. However, for a group of individuals within the LGBTQ+ population, attraction varies between romantic and sexual, and therefore these individuals require multiple terms to accurately express their identities. Coming out is the process by which an individual expresses their identity both to themselves and to others. While much is known about this process, little is known about how identifying with different, or discordant, sexual and romantic orientations affects this process. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to begin understanding the way in which identifying with discordant identities affects coming out in adults. This research was based on both the concept of splitting attraction into distinct parts and the understanding that coming out is both an internal process of self-acceptance and an external process of accepting one's part in a larger group by using semistructured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify key themes. Themes included the need for acceptance, the importance of education of both the individual and the general population, the role societal norms play in coming out, and reasons for coming out. Bringing more attention to the existence of discordant sexual and romantic orientations, allows for positive social change through the possibility of promoting acceptance and therefore coming out growth among this group of individuals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

"Coming out" is a term used to describe the process by which LGBTQ+ individuals define and explain their identity to themselves and others. Many labels for sexual orientation exist. These labels include well-known ones, such as heterosexual and homosexual, and those that are significantly less well-known, including asexual and pansexual. Research has indicated that individuals who identify with emerging categories within the LGBTQ+ population are at increased risk of mental health concerns, even compared to individuals who identify with better known orientations, such as homosexual or bisexual (Borgogna et al., 2019). While the LGBTQ+ population has remained a minority, a recent Gallup poll has shown that an increasing number of people in the United States are identifying as LGBTQ+, particularly among Generation Z (Jones, 2022).

However, for some, a single term for their orientation is not enough to reflect their sexual and romantic attractions accurately; a concept that is even less well-known within broader society. For such individuals, coming out is a potentially more complex process that involves coming to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of self in order to then express themselves to others. A lack of understanding of that process and how people are affected who experience such differing, or discordant, identities will hinder clinicians such as counselors in helping LGBTQ+ individuals in their care.

In this chapter, I will introduce additional background about both discordant identities and coming out, review the problem, and define the core research questions. I will also provide a basic understanding of the conceptual framework and explore how that framework influenced the nature and purpose of the study. I will offer definitions and

explore assumptions as well as delimitations and limitations and expand on the significance of this study.

Background

For many people, when asked to consider and define love, the immediate thought is to describe a romantic and sexual relationship. However, having studied love and attraction, researchers have been able to separate at least three kinds: romantic, sexual, and platonic (Mende et al., 2019). This distinction is particularly notable for those who identify as asexual—those who do not experience sexual attraction to individuals of any gender (Zheng & Su, 2018). The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN, 2021a) recognized four kinds of attraction: sexual, romantic, sensual, and aesthetic. As the understanding of attraction increases, so too does the understanding that the current language to describe attraction is insufficient.

Because of the assumption that sex and romance are inherently linked, the current language to describe a person's orientation has typically only covered sexual orientation. The pervasive assumption that when an individual is sexually attracted to those of a particular gender or genders, the romantic attraction is also to those of the same gender or genders.

However, there is a portion of the population for whom that is not true (Lund et al., 2016). For these individuals, their sexual orientation is discordant from their romantic orientation. Despite the recognition that discordant orientations exist, there was little focus on the phenomenon in the research. Most of the existing research focused on demonstrating what portion of the population experienced discordant orientations (Lund et al., 2016; Ybarra et al., 2019) or has discussed how the current labels for orientations

are not sufficient (Bailey et al., 2016; Calzo et al., 2017). There is a need for more research exploring how identifying with discordant orientations affects those who experience it.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed a model of identity development for lesbian women that offers two parallel branches, one for individual identity development and acceptance, and one for group identity development and acceptance. However, for that process to have truly begun, individuals require language to describe their orientation that suits them (Jhang, 2018). For example, it is impossible to describe oneself and come out to others as demisexual, feeling sexual attraction only after establishing an emotional connection (AVEN, 2021a), if one did not know the term existed.

Coming out for the first time can be a stressful experience. Anxiety about how, or even if, friends and family will accept them are common experiences among LGBTQ+ people prior to coming out (Grafsky, 2018). When coming out experiences do not go well, there is a high risk of rejection from family and other loved ones, which has happened in approximately 40% of coming out experiences (Hall, 2018). The stress associated with the decision to come out and the associated anxiety correlate to a higher risk of depression among LGBTQ+ youth. These risks and the associated anxiety are particularly true in cases where the label one is coming out with was less well known or less well understood (Wadsworth & Hayes-Skelton, 2015). However, when there was a positive coming out experience, there were many positive mental health effects, including increased feelings of acceptance and resilience (Brownfield et al., 2018).

The language and concepts used to describe both LBGTQ+ identities and the process of coming out are often based in Western understandings and therefore do not

always translate well to other cultures. For example, although often included under the bisexual umbrella, the Indigenous identity two-spirit, in its historical context; was more accurately a gender identity (Robinson, 2017). Choi and Israel (2016) demonstrated that applying Western and White standards of LGBTQ+ identity and coming out to Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent led to pathologizing healthy ways of approaching identity and the coming out process. Ellawala (2018) found that participants in Sri Lanka demonstrated a level of fluidity in their approach to sexual identity and roles that was incompatible with many Western theories of identity development, particularly stable stages of development. While these studies did not address the concept of discordant sexual and romantic orientations specifically; they will be important when considering how the culture of participants affects their understanding of such concepts, and how they relate these concepts to themselves.

The distinction between sexual and romantic orientations is one that rarely comes up in research into LGBTQ+ identities and labels. More research, such as the current study, will help to explore what the effects of identifying with discordant identities have on individuals when coming out, and will aid in building a better understanding of both discordant identities and the coming out process. This can include coming out as a process of internally recognizing and accepting one's identity, a process of accepting one's place in a larger group, or the more commonly recognized process of informing others about one's identity.

Problem Statement

Currently, there is little research that is directly reflective of discordant sexual and romantic orientations, and of that research; there is none that looks at how identifying

with discordant orientations affects the experience and process of coming out. While there was some research that explored what percentage of the population identified as such in both adults (Lund et al., 2016) and adolescents (Ybarra et al., 2019), that research does little to truly explore what such labels meant to the participants or how those labels affected them. Similarly, while there was research that approached this problem based on the recognition that current labels for sexual orientation do not always work as they do not always match individuals' lived experience, there was often a lack of direct understanding of how sexual and romantic attraction might be differing in these studies (Calzo et al., 2017). Finally, there was some research that acknowledged that when studying attraction in the asexual community, in people who still experience romantic attraction despite the lack of sexual attraction, the romantic attraction could be a confounding variable (De Luzio Chasin, 2011). None of the research listed above began to explore what identifying with discordant identities meant to those who did, or how it might have affected their lives and their relationships.

Similarly, while there was a lot of research about coming out and its importance, much of that research assumed that people were coming out as one thing. Some models for coming out explored different kinds of coming out conversations. These include pre planned discussions versus ones that happened in the spur of the moment, or conversations wherein individuals came out to express their interest in others or to educate them (Manning, 2015). Other models for coming out explored the reasons for coming out, such as feeling pressured to do so, discovering the terminology, or realizing the importance of the orientation to personal identity (Robbins et al., 2016). Other coming out models explored the factors that contributed to the decision to come out,

including where the individual was in the process of accepting their own identity, family

dynamics, messages received from the community, and expectations from the family

(Grafsky, 2018). Included in the understanding of coming out was the fact that potential

risk existed, such as estrangement from family (Grafsky, 2018) and increased

victimization (Gnan et al., 2019). However, coming out was not a guaranteed negative

experience, as it could allow for connections with others in the LGBTQ+ community

(Gnan et al., 2019), as well as other aspects of coming out growth such as increased

awareness of privilege (Brownfield, et al., 2018). All of these models carried with them

the assumption that those coming out are going to come out as something with one label,

instead of a combination of several.

Models of identity development typically assumed that one's sexual orientation

level would also describe romantic orientation. These models explored how the internet

and social media can influence one's identity development by allowing for education

about and exposure to new term; as well as the opportunity to explore attractions though

dating apps and other such sites (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Stewart et al. (2019) showed that

adolescents' identities could be fluid as they explored different kinds of attractions and

associated behaviors on the way to determining the identities and labels that suited them

best.

Harper and Swanson (2019) proposed a different model of identity development.

Originally developed to describe the experiences of those who identify as bisexual,

pansexual, or polysexual, it relied less on stages and more on an interaction between five

different aspects on a continual basis. They identified labeling, coming out, dealing with

oppression and stigma, the understanding and intersectionality of identities, and the

understanding of how one relates to their community and politics within the framework of their identity as the important aspects in the process of identity development.

However, despite having recognized the importance of identity development and its fluid nature, those models still assumed that individuals would come to a singular understanding of their identity. To begin developing identity models and coming out models that take into consideration discordant identities, it is vital to first understand what the coming out process is for those individuals.

Purpose of the Study

Through the current study, I sought to increase understanding of what it means to individuals who identify with discordant identities to do so, and to increase understanding of unique challenges associated with coming out as such. This will allow for a foundational understanding of the process of coming out with multiple aspects to one's orientation. Additionally, this may increase the understanding of the complexities of attraction and how people use or create language to better describe themselves, which may, in turn, allow clinicians to better guide individuals through the process of self-discovery. Wagaman (2016) demonstrated that when LGBTQ+ individuals can explain their identities in their own language, they are more resistant to social stigma and better able to identify and use their own agency.

Nature of the Study and Research Question

This research used a qualitative, phenomenological design with semistructured interviews to gather information from adults who identified with discordant sexual and romantic orientations, and who had come out as such to at least one other person, about their coming out experiences. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to

analyze the data. After interviewing adults who fit the inclusion criteria described above, I began to identify specific themes in both the individual interviews for each question, as well as themes across interviews, using the process outlined by Smith et al. (2022) and further defined in Chapter 3. The main research question posed was the following: What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for the current research was hermeneutic phenomenology. Initially developed by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, phenomenology aims to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon (Beck, 2019). Heidegger, a student of Husserl, expanded on Husserl's teachings, focusing on how a researcher is unable to fully withhold judgment when doing phenomenological research, as the researcher is also existing in the world (Beck, 2019). I used this principle to guide my IPA, as Smith et al. (2021) acknowledged that part of the IPA process is how the researcher makes meaning of the participant's responses.

The current research was based on the theoretical framework for attraction posed by AVEN (2021a), which indicates that attraction consists of multiple distinct types, which research supports as described above. With this understanding comes the concept that sexual orientation and romantic orientations can differ as sexual attraction and romantic attraction do. While not addressed explicitly in the research, the LGBTQ+ community, specifically the asexual community, calls this model the split attraction model (AVEN, 2021b). Those who use this model describe a split between their sexual and romantic attractions, and therefore orientations. For example, one might identify as

bisexual aromantic, asexual heteroromantic, or pansexual homoromantic. This model

provides the basis for the understanding of discordant identities. While the split attraction

model does not specifically address coming out, it does provide language to help those

who find that traditional models of describing their sexual orientation do not seem to fit.

Additionally, this research used the identity development model proposed by

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) to guide the understanding of the coming out process as

both an individualized, internal process, and about understanding and accepting one's

place in a larger community. In other words, coming out is viewed as the internalized

acceptance of one's behaviors and feelings, and the externalized acceptance of a label or

name for those behaviors and feelings that offers connection with others. Because the

combination of these two frameworks is new, a phenomenological approach was best

suited to guide the creation of the research question, interview questions, and analysis

process. Interview questions included addressing how the client felt they fit into the

larger community as well as what their identities meant to them personally. It was also

important to analyze the data from both the perspective of the individual's acceptance of

themselves and their attractions and behaviors, and how they felt about any terms or

labels that they came to use.

Definitions

The traditional understanding of sexual orientation is that it describes one's

identity based on sexual and romantic feelings and behaviors towards a gender or genders

(Salomaa & Matsick, 2019). However, in this current research, I used sexual orientation

to describe only that part of an identity based on sexual attraction and behaviors.

Romantic attraction and behaviors that do not include sex or sexual intimacy are an

individual's romantic orientation. These definitions are in line with the distinctions made by AVEN (2021a), as well as previous research exploring romantic orientations in individuals who identify as asexual (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2022). Concordant sexual and romantic orientations are the same, as assumed in the traditional ways of describing orientation. Having a discordant identity indicates that one's sexual and romantic orientations are different from each other.

In this research, some of the language used to describe sexual or romantic orientations is less familiar to those outside of the LGBTQ+ population. One such term is *demisexual*, typically considered to be on the asexual spectrum, which specifically refers to individuals who do not experience sexual attraction until there is an emotional connection (Hille et al., 2020).

Other terms, some of which do not appear in scholarly sources, used throughout this paper include the following:

Aesthetic attraction: Attraction to one's physical form, finding one aesthetically pleasing (LGBTA Wiki, 2022).

Aegosexual: A microlabel within asexuality; typically refers to someone who is aroused by, or interested in, sexual content in fictional settings but does not desire to engage in sexual behaviors personally (AVEN Wiki, 2024).

Aegoromantic: The romantic orientation version of aegosexual. An individual who is interested in romantic content in fiction but does not desire to engage in romantic behaviors personally.

Alterous attraction: The desire for emotional closeness, not necessarily either romantic or platonic in nature (LGBTA Wiki, 2022).

Asexual lesbian: A female-presenting individual who identifies as asexual for their sexual orientation (i.e., not sexually attracted to anyone) and homoromantic for their romantic orientation (i.e., romantically attracted to individuals of the same gender) and specifically prefers the label of lesbian.

Biphobia: A variation of queerphobia or homophobia specific to bisexuals and bisexual-related issues (Brownfield et al., 2018).

Bisexual homoromantic: An individual who identifies as bisexual for their sexual orientation (i.e., sexually attracted to both their own and other genders, or to male-presenting and female-presenting individuals) and homoromantic for their romantic orientation (i.e., romantically attracted to individuals of the same gender).

Coming out growth: Growth characterized by having worked through the stress of coming out such that there is an increase one's honesty, relationships, mental health and well-being, identity, and advocacy (Brownfield et al., 2018).

Demiromantic: The romantic orientation version of demisexual. An individual who does not experience romantic attraction until there is an emotional connection (AVEN, 2024).

Grayromantic: The romantic orientation version of graysexual. An individual whose experience of romantic orientation falls between the aromantic and alloromantic definitions, such as someone who experiences romantic attraction infrequently (AVEN, 2024).

Heterosexual demiromantic: An individual who identifies as heterosexual for their sexual orientation (i.e., sexually attracted to individuals of a different gender

identity) and demiromantic for their romantic orientation (i.e., romantically attracted to individuals only after developing a close emotional connection with them).

Homoromantic: The romantic orientation version of homosexual. An individual who experiences romantic attraction towards others of the same gender (AVEN, 2024).

Intersectionality: The name given to the concept that one can have multiple intersecting identities that affect the other identities and how society perceives an individual (Wagaman, 2016).

Panromantic: The romantic orientation version of pansexual. An individual who experiences romantic attraction to people of all genders (AVEN, 2024).

Platonic attraction: The desire to form a platonic relationship with another person (LGBTA Wiki, 2022).

Queerplatonic attraction: The desire to form a queerplatonic relationship with another person (i.e., a relationship that does not fit either conventional platonic or romantic relationships but instead blends aspects of both; LGBTA Wiki, 2022).

Sensual attraction: The desire to touch another individual in nonsexual ways (LGBTA Wiki, 2022).

Assumptions

I assumed that experiencing discordant sexual and romantic orientations would affect the coming out process. I made this assumption because it is known that having accurate language to define oneself is crucial in coming out (Jhang, 2018). Having identities that are lesser known affects the coming out process as well (Wadsworth & Hayes-Skelton, 2015).

I also assumed that participants would be truthful and open about their experiences. Oates et al. (2022) demonstrated that interviewees are equally likely to respond honestly and openly regardless of the method used for online interviewing. Therefore, it was reasonable to assume that my participants would be honest in their self-disclosure about their experiences coming out.

Both assumptions were necessary for this study. The assumption that identifying with discordant sexual and romantic orientations affects coming out, whether as the internal or external process, was the impetus for this research. Without conducting interviews about the experience of coming out, it would have been impossible to gain insight on this phenomenon. If I had not assumed the individuals interviewed to be open and honest, then the themes identified and conclusions drawn from the interviews would also have been questionable.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focused specifically on the experiences of coming out with discordant identities. Both traditional and most contemporary models of LGBTQ+ identity development, as well as most research that explores the coming out process, involve an assumption that one term is sufficient to fully define a person's identity in this context. However, this is not always true, as evidenced by the creation of the split attraction model within the asexual community (AVEN, 2021b). Therefore, this study did not focus on other, more traditional frameworks of orientation, such as the Kinsey scale or the Klein sexual orientation grid, as both involve an assumption that sexual and romantic attraction, and orientations, are the same.

It is necessary to hear from individuals who have come out to at least one person with discordant identities about their experiences, as that disclosure is an important part of the process, and traditionally thought of as the end goal. Because individuals with discordant identities may feel more closely tied to one or the other of their identities, it is important to also explore that aspect of the coming out process. Specifically, this study explored how they came to feel like they belonged with a larger group as evidenced by the label or labels they chose, as proposed by the model developed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). Adults are more likely to have a stable identity with which to come out, as opposed to children or adolescents, who are more likely to still be exploring and defining their identity.

Limitations

One potential limitation of the current study was in ensuring transferability. Online recruitment often leads to a disproportionately high number of individuals from higher socioeconomic status, which in turn can lead to a disproportionately low number of minority participants. Because recruiting in this study was not based on demographic information, aside from ensuring that all participants were adults, having a skewed sample was possible. I collected data about clients' demographic information, including racial identity, ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status, to be mindful of this potential limitation and how it might affect themes and conclusions.

It was also important to ensure that researcher bias did not affect follow-up questions based on the semistructured nature of the interviews. As I was assuming that identifying with discordant identities would affect the coming out process, leading

questions were possible and necessary to avoid. Use of mindfulness-based interviewing techniques as suggested by Nicholls (2019) helped to minimize said bias.

Significance

One of the fundamental principles of ethical counseling practice is that of beneficence, which the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics defines as "working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being." A successful coming out, wherein one feels understood and supported by both themselves and others, is an important piece in the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ clients. As the understanding of the complexities of identity and the language used to describe those complexities increases, counselors will need to strive to ensure that they have both the understanding of the language as well as what identifying with certain labels may mean to their clients and how it might affect them. A lack of understanding might impair the counselor's ability to develop rapport with their clients or help them to gain the understanding needed to guide them towards personal growth and development.

As such, this study will help to provide counselors with a framework with which to understand how discordant sexual and romantic orientations affect individuals during the coming out process. This, in turn, will help counselors to better aid their clients so that they have a successful coming out experience, which in turn will lead to increased mental health and well-being of the LGBTQ+ population. As this population continues to grow, particularly among millennials and Generation Z, it will be vital that counselors have the tools, information, and language necessary to help this growing segment of the overall population.

Summary

Coming out describes both an internalized process of self-acceptance of one's attractions and behaviors, as well as an external process of acceptance of one's place in a group of others who experience similar attractions and behaviors. It is often a time of significant stress for LGBTQ+ individuals. This stress can increase when an individual's identities are not well-known by the public. There is a significant push in younger generations to be able to use terminology that they feel best describes them. As more clients from said younger generations begin seeking treatment, it will be vital for counselors to be able to aid them through the process of self-exploration and self-identification in order to promote increased mental health and general well-being in these individuals and therefore society as a whole.

Discordant sexual and romantic orientations are generally a concept that is not well known or understood. There is evidence within current research that validates a need for this distinction, both within the asexual community and within the larger LGBTQ+ community. Currently, while there are coming out models that address several different identities within the LGBTQ+ populations, as well as across different cultures, none examine how needing multiple terms to accurately express one's attraction might have an effect on the process of coming out. Therefore, the current study used a phenomenological approach and IPA to answer the following question: What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When considering attraction to another person, there is typically an assumption that it is a binary thing. An individual is either attracted to a person or is not. However, for some individuals, this binary view is overly simplistic and not an accurate reflection of how they experience attraction. This phenomenon is known within both the LGBTQ+ community, where it is known as the split attraction model (AVEN, 2021a), and among researchers studying love and attraction, who most often refer to it as experiencing discordant attractions (Lund et al., 2016).

AVEN (2021b) lists four distinct types of attraction. Specifically, it recognizes sexual, romantic, aesthetic, and sensual attractions. Listed on the LGBTA wiki (2021) are several types of physical attraction and emotional attraction, many of which do not appear in scholarly research on the topic. Physical attraction subtypes include sexual, aesthetic, and sensual, while emotional attraction subtypes include romantic, platonic, queerplatonic, and alterous attractions. Of particular note to the current research are sexual and romantic attractions.

Sexual attraction is the attraction that most typically think of when considering attraction. It includes a desire for sexual intimacy with another person, and classification is typically based on the gender of the person attracted to compared to the gender of the person experiencing attraction (AVEN, 2021b). Romantic attraction is the desire to engage in romantic acts and activities with someone that are not necessarily sexual in nature (AVEN, 2021b).

This distinction is particularly notable as it relates to the language of coming out. Generally understood as the experience of telling others about one's sexual orientation,

there is the underlying assumption that when one comes out, they do so with a single term to describe their identity. Knowing that this is not always the case, it is also important to explore more about what it means to come out for those who do so with multiple terms due to discordance between their sexual and romantic orientation. However, current research and models of coming out do not explore how experiencing this difference may play a role in the coming out experience. Therefore, in the current research, I propose to do so in an explicit manner.

I will begin by exploring how discordant sexual and romantic attractions appear in the research, beginning with early acknowledgements of the phenomenon directly as well as indications that the current language around sexual orientation is insufficient. I will demonstrate how this insufficiency has a greater impact on LGBTQ+ individuals outside the major LGB paradigm and show what current research indicates is the prevalence of discordant identities. Added to this, I will explore models of identity development for LGBTQ+ individuals, different kinds of coming out experiences, how culture can play a role in coming out, and the effects of coming out on mental health.

Literature Search Strategy

To find research on the above-mentioned topics, I used several databases, including APA PsycInfo, LGBTQ+ Source, MEDLINE with Full Text, SAGE Journals, SocINDEX with Full Text, and Taylor and Francis Online, accessed through the Walden University Library. Key search terms included *sexual attraction, sexual orientation, romantic attraction, romantic orientation, coming out, coming out models, identity development, discordant attraction, discordant identities, LGBTQ+ identity*, and *LGBTQ labels*. In addition, I used these terms in combination through the use of Boolean

operators in order to more fully search for topics where the scholarly sources were limited, such as romantic attraction. I generally limited my research to peer-reviewed journals or academic textbooks. However, some topics did not show in the scholarly sources available. For these topics, I supplemented with some information gathered from LGBTQ+ focused community forums, such as AVEN and the LGBTA wiki.

Conceptual Framework

This study used hermeneutic phenomenology as a conceptual framework. Phenomenology is a research method that seeks to understand the experiences that people have, based on how they describe those experiences (Dibley et al., 2020). It is the role of the researcher to make meaning of the descriptions provided. Martin Heidegger, a student of the father of phenomenology Edmund Husserl, acknowledged that as researchers are themselves part of the world, and thus likely exposed to the very phenomenon they are researching, it is impossible to completely detach in the ways recommended by Husserl (Dibley et al., 2020). This type of phenomenological study, known as both hermeneutic and interpretative phenomenology, was the most appropriate fit for this study. While steps were taken to minimize researcher bias, which will be explored more in Chapter 3, it was impossible to fully eliminate that bias.

Theoretical Framework

The best definition for discordant identities is the experience of having a difference in sexual and romantic attractions (Lund et al., 2016). Noted by researchers in ways such as love and desire (Diamond, 2003) or looking at how traditional labels for sexual orientation, such as heterosexual or bisexual, are insufficient for some (Thompson & Morgan, 2008), there is some evidence for this distinction. However, within the larger

LGBTQ+ community, this is a concept referred to as the split attraction model (AVEN,

2021b) and has been the subject of some debate as to its usefulness and potential

problems with its use (BetterHelp Editorial Team, 2018).

Sexual attraction, as discussed above, is the desire to engage in sexual activities

with another person, whereas romantic attraction is the desire to engage in romantic

activities with another person (AVEN, 2021a). While for many people these two types of

attraction overlap and are mutually inclusive, that is not the case for approximately 10%

of the population ($N = 411$, Lund et al., 2016; $N = 5,100$, Ybarra et al., 2018). Much of

the current research that addresses this phenomenon either explores the prevalence within

the population (Lund et al., 2016; Ybarra et al., 2018) or looks at how the labels that are

most often used, such as *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, and *bisexual*, do not fit with how

some people experience their attraction (Calzo et al., 2016; Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

Currently, there is no research that explores how identifying with discordant

identities affects the process of coming out. Commonly understood as the process of

telling others about a personal identity other than heterosexual and cisgendered, coming

out is also the process of coming to a personal understanding and acceptance of one's

own identity. Exploring how identifying in this different, more complex manner affects

both the internal and external process of coming out, as described by McCarn and

Fassinger (1996), also allows for a deeper understanding of how people relate to their

own sexuality.

Discordant Sexual and Romantic Attraction

The Case for Different Attractions

Recognition of different kinds of attraction exists outside the LGBTQ+ community, if not defined with the same kind of nuance. Diamond (2003) was among the first to develop a model showing different kinds of attraction, which she described as love and desire. She approached the biobehavioral model developed with three underlying premises: first, that sexual desire and romantic love are independent of each other (Diamond, 2003); second, that romantic love does not intrinsically have the same kind of gendered orientation as sexual desire; and finally, that while love and desire are functionally independent of each other, there is a connection between them (Diamond, 2003). She supported these premises using a combination of psychosocial, historical, and cultural research, as well as evidence based on the underlying biological mechanisms. In recognizing the distinction between sexual desire and romantic love, Diamond laid the groundwork for later recognition that sexual and romantic orientations are not inherently the same thing.

"Mostly Straight"

The discordance between sexual and romantic orientation shows in a variety of ways in the research, some more directly than others. One indirect way that it appears is in the recognition that current labels do not always work well to describe sexuality and sexual orientation. Thompson and Morgan (2008) used a mixed methods approach to study how female college students defined their own sexual orientation. Participants selected from options that included exclusively straight/heterosexual, mostly straight/heterosexual, bisexual, mostly gay/lesbian, exclusively gay/lesbian, as well as

other labels that were less defined. Thompson and Morgan (2008) found that women who

identified as mostly straight explored their identity more and expressed more uncertainty

about their identities than did their exclusively straight counterparts, and that the levels

were most similar to those of their bisexual and lesbian-identifying counterparts.

However, in terms of attraction and fantasy, they found that mostly straight women were

between exclusively straight and bisexual and lesbian women. Some participants even

noted that they were interested in sexual acts with other women, but not romantic

relationships, which demonstrates how some who experience discordant identities may

struggle find a singular label that suits them.

Following up on this concept, Calzo et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal latent

class analysis studying identity development in American youth. Participants ranged from

9–14 at the first survey and reported information on sexual orientation and development

in at least one subsequent survey, when they were between the ages of 12 and 23. They

found that while most participants identified as completely heterosexual, nearly 10%

identified as mostly heterosexual by emerging adulthood, as opposed to only 2.4% who

identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Calzo et al., 2016). They found that identifying as

mostly heterosexual began at 14, and that the percentage who identified as such showed a

consistent gradual increase each year until the cutoff at 23. This contrasted with

participants who identified as LGB, who showed a dramatic increase between 12 and 17.

Discordance Amongst the TQ+

Individuals who identify as mostly straight are not the only ones who express

discordance between their sexual and romantic orientations. Researchers studying

asexuality have noted that feelings of romantic attraction have been a confounding

variable in determining labels (Zheng & Su, 2018), as individuals who identify as asexual

report feelings of attraction based on their romantic orientation. Bulmer and Izuma

(2018) had both asexual and nonasexual participants complete a series of questionnaires

to measure attitude towards sex and romance and found that attitudes towards them

differed between asexuals who identified as aromantic and those who did not, showing

that discordant identities affect more than attraction. Galupo et al. (2016) used online

surveys to gather information on the sexual identity labels and what they meant to

participants who identified as transgender; or otherwise gender nonconforming. They

found that transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals also had a relatively high

rate of expressing discordant identities to describe their sexual and romantic attractions

and orientations.

This finding was further borne out by Galupo et al. (2015) and Walton et al.

(2016). In both research studies, participants completed online surveys or questionnaires

about how they would describe and define their sexual orientations. Galupo et al. (2015)

found that individuals who identified as either transgender or *plurisexual*, which is

something other than heterosexual or homosexual, were more likely to use multiple

identities in order to fully describe their orientations. Walton et al. (2016) found a wide

variety of responses that participants used to describe their orientations, including several

that were discordant in various ways, including bisexual homoromantic, heteroromantic

demisexual, and asexual lesbian.

Prevalence of Discordant Identities

Lund et al. (2016) used demographic data from a larger survey wherein

participants had described both their sexual attraction and orientation and their romantic

attraction and orientation. Participants answered the questions "Are you sexually

attracted to the …" and "Are you romantically attracted to the …" based on a

predetermined list of responses that included "opposite sex," "same sex," "both sexes,"

and "neither sex." Lund et al. (2016) then used these responses to determine labels such

as *heterosexual/romantic*, *homosexual/romantic*, *bisexual/romantic*, or *asexual/romantic*

that would best describe the participants' experiences. They stated that they did not

define attraction for participants to elicit more genuine responses. Lund et al. (2016)

reported that approximately 10% ($N = 411$) of participants reported discordant sexual and

romantic orientations, and that of those participants, approximately 68% identified as

bisexual and either hetero- or homoromantic. However, participants with discordant

identities also expressed various other combinations of sexual and romantic attractions,

including asexual-biromantic, heterosexual-homoromantic, or homosexual-biromantic.

This indicates that while discordant identities are most commonly found among

individuals who identify as bisexual, it is not exclusive to them and there can be any

combination of sexual and romantic orientations.

Ybarra et al. (2018) conducted a similar study looking at the relationship between

sexual identity, romantic attraction, and sexual behavior among adolescents. Similar to

the above study, they found that approximately 10% ($N = 5,100$) of adolescents surveyed

reported multiple identities, and that the biggest area of discordance was between sexual

identity and romantic attraction, with many adolescents reporting romantic attractions

outside their primary sexual identity.

Collectively, these results indicate that the distinction between sexual attraction

and romantic attraction is one that individuals who identify across both the sexual and

gender spectrums experience. While it is most prevalent in those who identity as something other than heterosexual or homosexual, it is not exclusive to those who identify with terms such as *bisexual* or *asexual*. Further, it shows that those who experience this distinction are noticing it as early as adolescence. Adolescence is a time wherein individuals are seeking to develop a sense of their identity, as described by Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. During such a time, it is crucial for individuals to be able to accurately describe their own identity; otherwise, it leads to identity confusion, such as for those described above who might describe themselves as "mostly straight" due to the lack of adequate language (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

However, when discussing sexual orientation, researchers often seem to assume that such labels describe sexual behavior and romantic attraction interchangeably, with some notable exceptions. This assumption carries into the language around coming out, which is known to be a critical time for the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Coming Out

Coming out is the term most often used to describe the act of becoming aware of one's own identity, accepting it as so, and then disclosing said identity to others (Manning, 2015). Many of the oldest models of coming out focus on self-acceptance of homosexual identity (Cass, 1984; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), namely the awareness and acceptance of one's identity as nonheterosexual. As more research into coming out and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals has been done, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of disclosing their identity to others, as well as the understanding that people could and would come out at different times to different people for different reasons (Manning, 2015).

Identity Development in LGBTQ+ Individuals

Traditionally, three major categories (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual) covered sexual orientation identities (Salomaa & Matsick, 2019). The assumption that these three labels are sufficient to fully describe human sexuality shows in measures for sexuality stretching as far back as the Kinsey scale, first published in 1948. However, they also carry with them an inherent assumption that one's attractions and behaviors are the same, which is not always true as demonstrated above. More contemporary measures for sexuality and sexual orientation have become more cognizant of the differences between different kinds of attraction but appear less frequently in research compared to more traditional, and limited, measures (Salomaa & Matsick, 2019). Although this greater recognition is starting to show in the measures used, it does not show in models of identity development or coming out.

Klein et al. (2015) noted that such models of identity development and coming out often described the process as one that happened in discrete stages in a rigid and predictable pattern. However, for many LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, coming out is a more complicated and dynamic process, as individuals choose to come out to some, but not others in their lives. To better understand the coming out experiences of the 15 LGBTQ+ youth who participated in the study, they used a photovoice methodology (Klein et al., 2015). Photovoice is a research method in which participants take photos of their communities to show their experiences and concerns both through the initial photos themselves and through discussion about what the photos show and why they took them (Haglund et al., 2016). Klein et al. (2015) found that for participants; an important part of their coming out experience was actually the time prior

to coming out, when they were hiding things and figuring things out. Participants shared

that coming out could be a dynamic experience, as they came out multiple times as they

figured out new aspects of their identity and were able to better express said identities.

Harper and Swanson (2019) further studied what this more fluid approach to

coming out was and used a similar approach to develop a nonsequential model for

coming to a bi/pan/polysexual identity. They discussed how previous models of identity

development for this population often use a stage model similar to early models of

homosexual identity development, which may not be the most appropriate model, as

individuals who identify as bi, pan, or polysexual may come to that identity in a more

fluid manner as well. They proposed a model of identity development with five tasks that

intersect and interact, of which coming out is only one (Harper & Swanson, 2019). Other

tasks included labeling, managing the impact of oppression and stigma, coming to an

identity in terms of the community and political spheres, and having an understanding

and integration of the intersection of the various identities. However, the creation of this

model was based on a review of current literature, and it requires research to test its

validity within the community (Harper & Swanson, 2019).

Coming Out Experiences

Manning (2015) used an open-ended survey to ask 130 participants about their

coming out experiences and found that coming out conversations grouped into seven

distinct types. These types included conversations that the LGBTQ+ individual planned,

those that emerged naturally, conversations that the non-LGBTQ+ person in the

conversation coaxed the other into having, confrontational conversations, conversations

as a prelude to romantic or sexual encounters, and conversations for educational

purposes. While all the above conversations were done in person, the final category was a broad category Manning (2015) referred to as mediated conversations, meaning that they had taken place through a medium other than face-to-face. He acknowledged that this category was overly broad and required further study in the future.

As part of Klein et al.'s (2015) study, participants discussed multiple factors that influenced their decision to come out to others. These factors included the availability of support from family, friends, and on an institutional level. Participants also discussed factoring in desire to be able to connect with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, partially due to the desire to know that they were not alone, in the decision to come out.

While all these factors are important, Grafksy (2018) has indicated that the support of family plays a significant role in the health of LGBTQ+ youth. To determine what factors were most important for LGBTQ+ youth when determining whether to come out to their family members, Grafsky (2018) used a combination of questionnaires and interviews to gather information from 22 participants. In addition to gathering information about their disclosure to their parents, participants also completed the Parent Child Closeness inventory to measure how close they were to their parents. Grafsky (2018) analyzed the data using constructivist grounded theory methods, and found that of the participants, only four had elected not to disclose their identity to their parents. Of those that disclosed to their parents, there was a combination of planned and unplanned disclosure to each parent. Grafsky (2018) found four major factors that influenced the decision to come out to their parents. These factors included how confident and comfortable they felt in their identity and the dynamics within their family, particularly how close they were to each parent. Other factors were the messages they had received

from family, friends, and the community and society about being LGBTQ+ and their expectations for how the disclosure would go (Grafsky, 2018). No evidence showed that one factor was more important than the others when making the decision to disclose to parents.

Coming Out in Different Cultures

While the theory regarding the decision to come out seems to work in Western societies, Jhang (2018) developed an independent theory regarding decisions to come out for more collectivist cultures such as Taiwanese. Jhang (2018) discussed how many of the issues around LGBTQ+ identities in Taiwanese culture are less about religious objections, and more about deviations from the traditional family-centered social order. They interviewed twenty-eight participants about their relationship with their family, their decision not to come out, and how they handle matters that might result in disclosure to their families. Using grounded theory methods to analyze the data, Jhang (2018) found that the differing expectations of the child's life and what it would mean for the family were at the root of the decision to disclose or not disclose to parents. Even when disclosure of their identity happened, or there were suspicions, the LGBTQ+ participants and their parents attempted to reconcile those different expectations without giving up their own expectations, which often resulted in failure. Several factors could influence this process of attempted reconciliation including other family members as both allies and threats, being in a stable romantic relationship, and the timing of the disclosure (Jhang, 2018).

Coming Out and Mental Health

Because coming out experiences can affect mental health for LGBTQ+ individuals, it is necessary to understand what those effects can be. One such problem can come when one's identity is lesser known and understood. Wadsworth and Hayes-Skelton (2015) found that individuals who identified as bisexual, or who wrote in their sexual orientation identity, also reported a higher level of social anxiety. They suggested that this correlates to having an identity that is less well known and understood.

Brownfield et al. (2018) used a phenomenological approach to examine coming out growth, which is a specific version of stress related growth in bisexual individuals. To explore this phenomenon, they interviewed thirteen bisexual individuals using a semistructured interview. They found several themes identified by participants about the growth that they experienced (Brownfield et al., 2018). These themes included being able to live more authentically and improved mental health, increased ability to advocate for themselves and the LGBTQ+ community, and increased awareness of privilege and oppression. Brownfield et al. (2018) also found increased awareness about issues such as biphobia, intersectionality, the queer community, and role models that participants can look up to. While a number of factors influence the presence of coming out growth, one factor is the presence of family support and understanding, which often leads to a more positive coming out experience (Brownfield et al., 2018).

While an important aspect of the coming out experience is the disclosure to friends and family members, it is also important to recognize that part of coming out is coming to terms with one's own identity. With this comes an increased level of resilience and resistance to life's challenges (Wagaman, 2016). To better understand this, Wagaman

(2016) interviewed fifteen young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 about the intersection of their identities and their experiences. While several themes were identified in this research, a vital one was the need to have agency in accepting and expressing various identities. Participants discussed how the current language around identity is often limiting and does not seem to be able to fully describe themselves, particularly the fluidity that can be a part of their identity (Wagaman, 2016). In this way, they resisted the predefined categories that society has created to be able to maintain the agency needed to define themselves. That ability to define oneself and express that identity in a way that felt most comfortable to their sense of self related to resilience and increased ability to act for social change and resist oppression and trauma (Wagaman, 2016).

Conclusion

Coming out is a complicated process, particularly as the understanding of the complexity of gender identity has deepened over time. It requires one to develop an understanding of oneself and one's place in the community and society that is not always easy to accept, particularly as many are not accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. It is also a time of possible uncertainty for LGBTQ+ individuals. This uncertainty can come from struggles to understand one's own identity, concerns about the reaction from friends and family members, as well as fears about the response from larger society. These concerns can vary based on the individual's culture. Successfully navigating this time is linked to positive outcomes, such as coming out growth, and can increase an individual's overall resiliency. The process of coming out can be further complicated when one's identity is not well known or understood.

Discordant identities are among the less known and understood ways of describing sexual and romantic orientation. This is particularly due to the common assumption that they are inherently the same thing, which many in the asexual community will tell you is not true (AVEN, 2021a). Despite this, current research shows that approximately 10% of the population identifies with discordant identities (N=411, Lund et al., 2016; N=5100, Ybarra et al., 2018).

Table 1 demonstrates the complexity of the process of coming out, both in the sense of internal acceptance and external expression. Conceptualized in a wide variety of ways, coming out is a process that researchers are always seeking to understand better. However, much of the initial research into coming out came with the assumption that an individual would come out with a singular label, as opposed to the different labels of someone who has discordant identities. Currently, there is no research that looks at how this more complex way of describing oneself is affecting the process of coming out, which is already complex.

Historical trends show that as labels related to LGBTQ+ and other such identities become better known, there is also an increase in the number of people who identify with those labels. Therefore, while currently 10% of the population identify with discordant identities, it is likely that number will increase in the future. Having an understanding now of what coming out with discordant identities means and is like for such individuals will allow counselors and counselor educators to better help and support potential clients in the future. The current study will use a phenomenological approach to begin gathering information on the lived experience of coming out with discordant identities in adults.

Table 1

Coming Out Models and a Summary of Their Stages

Coming out model	Major stages or phases
Cass (1984)	1. Identity Confusion- characterized by questioning one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. 2. Identity Comparison- characterized by feeling different from nonhomosexual peers. 3. Identity Tolerance- characterized by seeking out homosexual peers. 4. Identity Acceptance- characterized by increasingly positive view of homosexuality and a larger network of homosexual friends. 5. Identity Pride- characterized by feelings of pride about homosexual identity and increased feelings of loyalty towards other homosexuals. 6. Identity synthesis- characterized by increased contact with nonhomosexual peers and recognition of homosexual identity as one piece of total identity.
McCarn and Fassinger (1996)	Characterized by two parallel branches, Individual Sexual Identity and Group Membership Identity. Stage 1, Awareness, involves the recognition of being different individually and that different sexual orientations exist for the group. Stage 2, Exploration, involves exploration of erotic feelings for women individually and how one fits into the gay/lesbian group. Stage 3, Deepening/Commitment involves increased self-knowledge and commitment to lesbian identity individually and increased personal involvement with lesbians as a whole, along with increased awareness of oppression and consequences for the group. Stage 4, Internalization/Synthesis, involves internalizing love of women into overall identity individually, and internalizing identity as a member of a minority group.

Coming out model	Major stages or phases
Klein et al. (2015)	Challenged the idea that coming out is a linear process and identified only two stages, hiding from oneself and figuring things out. Touched on having to come out multiple times with multiple identities. Also challenged the idea that coming out was a necessary, or even always desirable, part of the queer experience.
Wagaman (2016)	Acknowledges that existing labels within the LGBTQ community are not always adequate for needs of youth and emerging adults. Argues for allowing individuals to play with, create, and claim identities as it suits them, and recognize that this may be a complex and dynamic process.
Harper and Swanson (2019)	Proposes a model of nonsequential tasks consisting of five aspects. 1. Labeling- characterized by the process of finding and accepting a label for their identity and rejecting ones that do not fit. May be done several times throughout the lifetime. 2. Salience and Intersection of Identities- characterized by the acknowledgement that sexual and/or affectional orientation is only one part of a person's identity. 3. Coming out- characterized by understanding and accepting one's identity and sharing it with others. 4. Community and/or political identity- characterized by understanding how one fits into the community and/or political context. 5. Managing the Impact of Oppression/Stigma- characterized by understanding of microaggressions, discrimination, marginalization and other forms of oppression and stigma.

Note. Language used to describe LGBTQ+ identities matches that used by researcher(s).

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose for this interpretative phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding of coming out with discordant sexual and romantic orientations among adults. Phenomenological studies have the goal of determining meaning of the lived experiences of the participants, as opposed to narrative studies, which report those lived experiences but do not extract meaning from them (see Creswell, 2012). This methodology is particularly well suited to areas of interest in which there are minimal data available.

Through this study, I sought to add to what is currently known about the experience of identifying with discordant sexual and romantic orientations by analyzing personal accounts from individuals who identified as such. In this chapter, I will explain the research design and rationale, explain the role of the researcher, and review the methodology in detail. I will also address issues related to trustworthiness and ethical considerations when working with this population.

Research Design and Rationale

The guiding question for this research was "What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations?" Currently, much of the research into sexual orientation, even among the LGBTQ+ population, carries with it an underlying assumption that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are the same thing, despite research that indicates otherwise. Studies such as Diamond (2003) established that sex and romance are not inherently linked, and it is more accurate to describe them as separate components of attraction. Known as the split attraction model within the LGBTQ+ community (AVEN, 2021a), this way of looking at

attraction is still relatively new to researchers. Although new, there is documentation that approximately 10% of the population, among both adults (Lund et al., 2016) and adolescents (Ybarra et al., 2019), experience this discordance between their sexual and romantic attractions and therefore their sexual and romantic orientations.

However, when discussing the process of coming out, no current model for this process allows for this distinction. Models that acknowledge coming out as a process, whether internal or external, carry with them an assumption that one is coming out as a single identity. They typically overlook the complexities of those identities or their possible fluidity, even though some researchers (Galupo et al., 2016) acknowledge the limits of the current labels used to describe sexual orientation. Because of the current lack of information available looking at coming out with discordant identities, a phenomenological approach and analysis was used in order to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is an analysis method first developed in 1996 by Johnathan Smith (Smith et al., 2022). Based in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA uses these principles to help researchers develop a deeper understanding of people, who are in turn developing a deeper understanding of various events in their lives. Key to IPA is allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms, rather than using preexisting categories (Smith et al, 2022). However, IPA also acknowledges the role of the researcher as the analysis tool. While the participant is attempting to understand their experience, the researcher is attempting to understand the participant through the lens of their experience.

IPA allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of coming out with discordant identities based on interviews with participants who had done so. The goal of IPA is to gain a deeper understanding of how a participant has perceived an event and how it affected them, rather than to gain an understanding of the event itself (Ungvarsky, 2020). The focus on the perception of the events rather than the events themselves allowed for the determination of meaning that may apply to a broader population.

Role of the Researcher

Part of doing phenomenological research was understanding my role as researcher and the biases that I brought into the research. I identify as both asexual and aromantic. However, there was a period of approximately seven years after I first identified as asexual during which I worked to determine if I felt that aromantic was also an appropriate label for me. I had experienced crushes on people before and even desired to have intimate relationships. However, much of the trappings of a romantic relationship never appealed to me, and I often struggled to grasp what others seemed to be getting from their romantic relationships that I was not getting from my deep friendships. Over time, I was able to understand that romance was not something that I was interested in either.

However, this time that I spent exploring this area and seeking a deeper understanding of myself led me to wonder what might have happened if I had come to the conclusion that my sexual and romantic orientation were not the same. If I instead determined that a label like asexual heteroromantic or even asexual panromantic were more accurate in describing me, how would I handle that fundamental difference in self?

And beyond me, how would my loved ones, my friends and family, handle that change in the thinking of self? For years, those closest to me understood that because I referred to myself as asexual, I was not interested in dating or marriage or any of those romantic attachments. How would they have reacted if I had come to them and said, "Just kidding! Still totally asexual, but also I want to date and get married"? How would a potential partner have reacted? And would it have been different if I had come out a second time, compared to if I had been able to say the first time that my sexual and romantic orientations were different for me?

The questions then sparked within me an interest in exploring this exact idea. For those who do experience their sexual and romantic attractions and orientations as separate from each other, how does that affect their coming out experiences with their loved ones? Do they make a final determination and come out then? Do they come out with a label and then not bother to tell others when they feel they have come to a more accurate conclusion? What is this experience like for those who go through it? And what can those experiences teach about discordant identities and about coming out in general?

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as used in this research, acknowledges that the researcher is the instrument used and thus will bring in their own previous understanding of the topic, as described above (Dibley et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). However, it was important for me to be mindful of how my experiences and history might lead to unintentional biases on my part. Even the fact that I asked these questions was due to the assumption that there would be a difference in the coming out process due to identifying with discordant sexual and romantic orientations. In order to minimize issues related to

any preconceived notions I had going in, I incorporated mindfulness-based techniques into my data analysis so as to focus more fully on the participants' reported experiences.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants were adults, ranging in age from mid-20s to early 40s, who identified with discordant sexual and romantic orientations and who had come out to at least one other person as such. To ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria, purposeful sampling was used (Creswell, 2012). Recruitment utilized online platforms including Discord, as well as reaching out to LGBTQ+ centers in the Baltimore and Washington, DC area. As part of recruitment, participants were asked to complete a brief survey (Appendix C) that included questions to ensure that they met the established criteria.

Discord is an online platform wherein individuals from across the world who have a common interest can connect via texting, audio or video calls, or other forms of media sharing (Colder Carras et al., 2021). While originally designed to connect people around the world who play video games, Discord has expanded to serve a much larger population. Individual servers cater to a wide variety of interests and can bring together people who share the same hobbies or classmates to form a study group (Discord, 2021). While it is possible to know the others in a server, typically users remain anonymous using screen names and can even choose nicknames specific to the server. In this way, it is possible to use Discord like other social media platforms to recruit individuals without knowing them in any meaningful way.

I contacted moderators of various Discord servers for permission to post a notice requesting participants (Appendix A) for this research. The notice included a link to a

Google Form that prospective participants completed. This form included an option to include the Discord username so that I could screen out possible participants with a close connection (Appendix C). Also included in the form was a request for an email address to send informed consent information such as researcher's name, school's information, and the goal of the research as well as the format and length of the time commitment, and the Walden University IRB approval number, #06-20-23-1011848. AVEN (2021c) has guidelines posted at https://www.asexuality.org/?q=research.html that I followed before recruiting via AVEN's Discord server.

I also created a flyer containing the same information as the social media post described above as well as my school email address and sent it to LGBTQ+ centers in Baltimore and Washington, DC to recruit additional participants if needed (Appendix B). While participants recruited via flyer would have been likely be predominantly from Maryland and the surrounding areas, as that is where I live, online recruitment allowed for participants from across the United States and internationally.

The role of saturation is complex for IPA (Saunders et al., 2018). Some dismiss it entirely, focusing instead on IPA's pursuit of full and rich narratives. Others find it more helpful to ensure saturation within each data set as opposed to across the data through themes. As previous research indicates that sample sizes ranging from three to 25 are preferable for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2012; Sims et al., 2018), I recruited a total of 13 participants for the present study and worked to ensure internal saturation of my data through my interviews.

Data Collection

I used semistructured interviews to collect data, which took 22–42 minutes. Interview questions were based on a pilot study I did in a previous class (Mangen, 2020). The questions focused primarily on participants' experiences with both internally coming out with discordant identities and the external experience (Appendix D). Throughout the previous class, I presented interview questions in a forum to all classmates, as well as both the instructor and teaching assistant, and elicited feedback to ensure that questions both covered the desired information and approached it through a phenomenological lens. Furthermore, I used specific peer debriefing to demonstrate validity of both the interview questions and procedure.

I met with participants over Zoom after screening to ensure that each participant was appropriate for the research. Zoom was the preferred platform as it was familiar to both myself and the participants, with participant consent given both prior to the meeting and on the recordings made with a separate digital recorder. I notified participants both prior to the meeting and at the beginning that they could terminate the interview at any point with no repercussions. I also included in the detailed informed consent paperwork that participants could contact me if they needed assistance finding a mental health provider to aid in addressing any issues brought up by the interview questions, as well as my school email address, which they could use to contact me.

Following the interview, or if the participant chose to end early, as part of the debriefing process they had the option to express any concerns about the interview. At that time, I also provided them with time to ask any questions about the general topic. I

provided participants with my school email address so that they could contact me with any concerns in the future.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis used the IPA (Alase, 2017) method. This method required multiple reviews of the transcriptions made of each interview in order to determine the most salient points of each response through a series of condensations, of which a minimum of three are recommended in the method outline by Alase (2017).

I followed the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022). The first step was to fully immerse myself in the original data by reading and rereading. Doing my own transcriptions at this stage also helped me to practice mindfulness in the immersion. After I immersed myself, I started to make exploratory notes about the data provided, and then I condensed those notes into experiential statements (Smith et al., 2022). The goal was to condense these statements into personal experiential themes by looking for connections across them, which were then in turn named and consolidated. After I had completed these steps for each of the individual interviews, I took the personal experiential themes that I had identified and created group experiential themes out of them (Smith et al., 2022).

Reflexivity

Throughout the process, I reflected on what my goals were in not only conducting the research in general, but also conducting it in this specific way. I incorporated mindfulness-based techniques as I did my reflections as suggested by Nicholls (2019). This aided me in being present both as I conducted the interview, which helped me to

pick up nuances, and during data analysis to help me be aware of any biases that might have influenced how I coded the data.

Coding

I completed coding using the procedure by Smith et al. (2022). After each of the condensations, I reviewed my results using the mindfulness-based techniques and debriefed as appropriate with my dissertation committee, specifically my chair and committee member. Coding was done by hand rather than through software in order to preserve my role as the researcher in doing IPA.

Themes

Themes were determined by analyzing the final condensation of the interviews and looking for commonalities across participants, as described in the procedure by Smith et al. (2022). When themes seemed to have multiple meanings, I consulted the original transcript for clarification.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

Reflexivity is the process by which a researcher is simultaneously aware of themselves as both the researcher and a tool of the research (McNarry et al., 2008). As such, it requires that a researcher be intimately aware at all times of their biases and judgements, and how those are affecting their analysis of the data. Mindfulness-based practices, such as those taught by dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), can help to ensure that researchers have an appropriate level of awareness (Nicholls, 2019).

As mindfulness can take many forms, in this particular case I kept a journal with my thoughts and reactions as I completed each step of the data collection and analysis.

Keeping this journal related to both data collection and data analysis, and the entire process helped to guarantee reflexivity through mindfulness, and thus credibility.

Transferability

To demonstrate transferability in interpretative phenomenological analysis, it is necessary to provide the reader with a rich, detailed account of both the data collected and the analysis that has been done to produce the themes (Smith et al., 2022). Doing this also allowed for the demonstration of the criteria set out by Nizza et al. (2018) for excellence in IPA. These criteria include constructing a compelling narrative, developing a vigorous experiential account, closely reading and analyzing the words of the participants, and paying attention to both convergence and divergence in the data. By including sufficient information to meet these criteria, I have sought to enable readers to judge for themselves the transferability of my work to others who are similar to my participants in greater or lesser detail.

Dependability and Confirmability

Audit trails tell the record of how a qualitative study was conducted (Carcary, 2020). They can include the raw data, notes on both the analysis and synthesis, and the process notes. This allows for the demonstration of both dependability and confirmability. The journals described above allow for the creation of an audit trail. Additionally, using them to help demonstrate mindfulness-based reflexivity helped to further establish confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

I reminded participants as part of the informed consent process that they had no obligation to continue participation if they decided to stop, regardless of whether that

decision came prior to or during the interview. I further informed participants that, due to

the nature of doctoral research, their responses would be shared with others, but in a way

that would preserve their confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality, interviews were

conducted via Zoom, and the participant and I both verbally confirmed being in a safe

and confidential space prior to the beginning of the interview. All recordings were

labeled with the date and time of the interview to further protect participant

confidentiality. I labeled transcriptions as Participant 1, 2, 3, and so forth as part of

confidentiality. Furthermore, I kept all recordings and transcriptions on a separate

external hard drive that was both encrypted and password protected. This hard drive was

kept in a lock box. After five years, data will be destroyed using pulverization as

recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.). I only

shared raw data with Walden University staff as necessary. I will follow Walden

University guidelines regarding the appropriate amount of time to maintain the data and

before destroying it. As part of the debriefing process, I reminded participants that they

could contact me to aid them in finding local LGBTQ+ friendly mental health providers

for ongoing care if needed.

Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used to conduct this phenomenological

research. It included the role of the researcher, participant selection methods, data

analysis plans, and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and ensure that the research was

conducted in an ethical manner. I recruited participants through online sources and

ensured that they met criteria using a screening survey. Data were analyzed using IPA,

and I practiced mindfulness to help ensure that bias was minimized, and trustworthiness

was ensured. Steps were taken to ensure that participants' confidentiality was maintained, and records were stored in a confidential manner and will be destroyed appropriately after the allotted time.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to use IPA to answer the following question: What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations? In this chapter, I will review the setting in which the study took place, as well as the demographics of the participants. I will review data collection and analysis methods and demonstrate evidence of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This chapter will also include the results of the study.

Setting

There are no known organizational conditions that may have influenced the participants in this study. Data collection occurred approximately three and a half years following the COVID-19 pandemic. No specific personal conditions occurred that may have influenced the interpretation of the results.

Demographics

Of the 13 participants, six self-identified as millennial and/or Gen Z, one self-identified as Gen X, and the remaining six did not offer a generation. Six participants used she/her pronouns, four used they/them pronouns, two used she/they, and one used he/him. One participant self-identified as Latinx and was from South America, one participant was from Indonesia, and one participant was raised in China. The remaining 10 participants reported that they lived in North America or Western Europe, and one participant was an Asian American immigrant. Three participants reported either being or being raised Roman Catholic, one of whom now reported being agnostic. There was one participant who identified as Pagan, one as Jewish, one as Christian, one as Atheist, and

one as having been raised Muslim. The remaining five participants declined to provide their religious affiliation.

Eleven of the participants identified as asexual, with one specifically identifying with the microlabel *aegosexual*. Of the remaining two participants, one identified as bisexual, and one stated that they felt that they did not have a sexual orientation. There was more variety in the romantic orientations, with the most common being heteroromantic, as five participants identified as such. Other romantic orientations included aromantic, aegoromantic, demiromantic, grayromantic, homoromantic, and panromantic. There were some participants who identified with different orientations within the asexual/aromantic umbrella, such as one participant who stated that she was asexual aegoromantic, or another who stated that they were asexual demiromantic. Table 2 includes the percentage of participants included in the various demographic groups listed above.

Table 2

Demographics of Study Participants

Demographics	# of participants	Percentage of total
Self-identified generation		
Millennial and/or Gen Z	6	46.15
Gen X	1	7.69
Chose not to disclose	6	46.15
Pronouns		
She/her	6	46.15
They/them	4	30.77
She/they	2	15.38
He/him	1	7.69
Nationality		
South America	1	7.69
Indonesia	1	7.69
China	1	7.69
North America	8	61.54
Western Europe	2	15.38
Religion		
Roman Catholic	3	23.08
Pagan	1	7.69
Jewish	1	7.69
Christian	1	7.69
Atheist	1	7.69
Muslim	1	7.69
Chose not to disclose	5	38.46
Sexual orientation		
Asexual	11	84.62
Bisexual	1	7.69
N/A	1	7.69
Romantic orientations		
Heteroromantic	5	38.46
Aromantic	2	15.38
Panromantic	2	15.38
Demiromantic	1	7.69
Grayromantic	1	7.69
Homoromantic	1	7.69
Aegoromantic	1	7.69

Note. Percentages rounded to second decimal for ease of reading.

Data Collection

Thirty-three individuals completed the initial screening survey. Of them, 15

responded to my email requesting to schedule a time to meet for the interview. Thirteen

total participants completed the semistructured interview via Zoom over a 2-month

period. Table 3 shows the percentage of response rates.

Table 3

Response Rates to Initial Survey and Emails About Scheduling for Study Recruitment

	Number of respondents	Percentage of total respondents	Percentage of total emails
To initial survey	33	100.00	N/A
To email about scheduling	15	45.45	100.00
Total participants	13	39.39	86.67

Note. Percentages rounded to second decimal for ease of reading.

Interviews lasted between 22 and 42 minutes and were recorded using a digital

audio recorder. There were no variations from the data collection methods outlined in

Chapter 3. There were two unusual circumstances during data collection. One participant

briefly lost internet, resulting in 8 minutes of silence before they were able to rejoin the

Zoom meeting. Another participant requested to restart the audio during the debrief,

resulting in an additional 7.5 minutes of discussion related to their experience.

Data Analysis

IPA was used to analyze the data. Using this method, I first transcribed the raw

data from audio files. Audio files were transcribed and reviewed multiple times for

accuracy, at which time exploratory notes were created. The exploratory notes were also

subject to multiple reviews before being further condensed into personal experiential

themes for each case. Once I identified all additional personal experiential themes, all themes were entered into a spreadsheet and organized by participant for each question. Color coding was utilized to determine similarities in group experiential themes.

Using this methodology, several key themes became apparent. These themes included the need for acceptance and understanding, the role of education of both oneself and others, how societal norms affect coming out, and the reasons participants were choosing to come out. These themes, as well as several subthemes, will be explored in more detail below. While not every participant addressed all of these themes, there were no cases of discrepancy from the themes identified.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Reflexivity, and thus credibility, were maintained through the use of mindfulness practices. While the original intention was to use a series of journals throughout the data collection and data analysis process, there was no full journaling process. Instead, I took brief notes about thoughts and feelings that I noticed throughout the process. These notes did include questions about possible biases, such as "Why am I trying so hard to fit this into the framework I know?" This allowed for appropriate challenging of said biases as needed.

Transferability

Transferability in IPA is somewhat subjective, as it requires the researcher to provide a rich account of the data collected and the analysis. The onus of determining transferability to others beyond this study is thus dependent upon the reader.

Dependability and Confirmability

While, as stated above, there were no formal journals for mindfulness, the fact that there were additional notes taken during both the data collection and analysis process about my state of mind and openness to the possibility of bias allows for the use of the raw data, in addition to the mindfulness-based notes that were taken, to create an audit trail to help ensure dependability. Additionally, the mindfulness-based notes will help to establish confirmability.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

Through this study, I attempted to answer the following question: What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations? In seeking these experiences, I conducted a semistructured interview asking participants about their experiences connecting to the larger LGBTQ+ community and when they noticed that their sexual and romantic orientations were discordant. I also asked participants to share about their coming out experience, including what factors influenced their decision on when to come out and to whom, their expectations of their coming out experience compared to the reality of their experience, and what meaning their experience had for them. I further asked what they felt they had learned because of their coming out experience, and if they had come out multiple times, what that experience was like.

In the analysis of the data, four themes emerged, with three of them having two subthemes each. The themes identified were (a) the need for acceptance; (b) the importance of education, with subthemes related to education of the self and education of others; (c) the role of societal norms, with subthemes related to the need for more fluidity

and the need for more granularity; and (d) reasons for coming out, with subthemes related to feeling familial pressure to do so and wanting to share an important part of oneself. Further exploration of these themes is below.

Need for Acceptance

The need for acceptance showed up across all participants, although some participants phrased it as a need for understanding, or a need for safety. Across the participants was the idea that if they were going to come out to someone, they felt it was important that it be someone who would offer support and not question or reject their identity. As P1 put it, "it's kind of the ultimate friendship test," going on to elaborate that if someone was accepting, they knew they could be trusted, and if someone was not accepting, they knew that the relationship was not going to last long term.

Other participants shared that they often found it easier to come out to other members of the LGBTQ+ community. P2 described choosing to come out to friends in the LGBTQ+ community: "I knew that they were very queer and were plugged into understanding the more quote, unquote niche identities and wouldn't have a million questions just on like the dictionary definition thereof," a sentiment echoed by many participants.

Regardless of the identity of those they were choosing to come out to, participants were unanimous in their desire have acceptance from their loved ones, and several talked about feeling anxious about whether they would be accepted or not. P9 discussed how even she "expected to be accepted, but also, there's also a fear of some kind of rejection or dismissal. So, not having that was a … sigh of relief." She also shared that she had

initially been hesitant to come out to her sister because "I didn't want that pushback on who I was."

That anxiety about rejection seemed higher for those participants who either lived in areas where the dominant culture tends to be more conservative, or had families that tended to be more conservative. Several participants discussed either choosing not to come out to family whom they felt would not be understanding due to their conservative values, such as P3, who phrased it as "My family is very conservative. And they don't understand a whole lot." Other participants discussed how living in a dominant conservative culture can make it difficult to come out or find a community to connect with. P12 specifically stated that due to the dominant conservative culture they lived in and their family's overall conservative views, "It makes it pretty hard, hard for my identity to be seen here," and "I'm not at a safe place to do that sort of thing. To connect like that." P13 acknowledged that the comparatively high number of people who espoused liberal views in her area meant that "My experiences are from a place of privilege as well," as she did not have to worry as much about rejection from her family or her larger community.

Education

The importance of education was something that all the participants of this study discussed. Within that, two major subthemes emerged, the importance of educating oneself and the importance of others having education and understanding of LGBTQ+ related topics.

Education of Self

The concept of educating oneself most frequently appeared in the form of "Basically I read an article on asexuality to be a good ally or something, and realized it was describing me," as P11 put it. She went on to share that, "basically, when I found out about asexuality, I found out about the split attraction model, I pretty much knew right away that that applied to me." For many, it was learning about different sexual and/or romantic orientations, and particularly that they could be different, that helped them to realize that their own orientations were different. P9 described it as "Like, the split attraction model, I didn't know about it until I started reading more about asexuality. And I was like … oh, there's this other. There's romantic separate from this, separate from that." P3 described how the exposure to different LGBTQ+ identities helped them to start the process of exploring their own identity, stating, "And I met so many other people, so many other trans, so many other asexuals that like, I started realizing. It just expanded what I could think of."

Many participants discussed how finding a term, or terms, that they felt described their experience came with a sense of relief for them. P7 shared that she "entered, the AVEN, Asexual Visibility Education Network. And, that was when I actually felt belong. It was like a glove. The label felt like a glove to me," and P9 explained that she felt like she was

> in this place of "am I strange, am I weird, am I different …" Then when I finally found the words for that. It was sort of this big sense of relief … I'm not the only one that feels this way.

In these kinds of ways, the exposure to new terms and ways of framing the concepts of sexual and romantic orientations seemed to help many participants to have a deeper understanding of themselves and increase their sense of self-acceptance.

Education of Others

Many participants discussed how they found that when others had more education on terminology or the split attraction model, they found it easier to come out to them, which they typically found in the LGBTQ+ community. P12 described it as follows: "I wanted to be able to have a supportive structure in case coming out wasn't safe. So, the first people I came out to were ones I already knew were queer … I knew that they would understand."

Conversely, when their loved ones did not have that knowledge, it could be a barrier to coming out. P1 described it as follows: "It feels like any time I decide to come out, I have to grab my PowerPoint presentation and head off all the awful assumptions and questions and get way too personal sometimes." P5 shared that she would "love to talk about it. Tell anyone who wants to listen, but I just don't know sometimes who is, you know, is going to understand." P7 also discussed how some people had seemed initially understanding and when that changed, "I thought they understood that, but they didn't. And they said that, me not feeling a sexual attraction was weird, and I was not normal, and they said that to me." In these ways, the lack of education with the overall population can make folks with discordant identities less willing to come out and share their identity with others in their lives.

While some did not want to have to educate others, P10 shared that "I sort of made it my unofficial mission to educate people in China about the nontraditional,

nontraditional orientations." P4 agreed with this idea, stating, "I'm kind of an open book, it means they can ask me questions and it can kind of demystify it," going on to share that she had even had some people in her life who had been able to have a new, deeper understanding of themselves because of her and her openness about her own experiences.

Societal Norms

Of the thirteen participants, ten of them talked about how societal norms influenced their experiences with coming out. In some cases, this came in the form of how rigid society tended to look at sexual orientation, particularly in terms of labels being stagnant or the lack of willingness to explore things outside of society's expectations. In other cases, societal norms came in the form of society talking about certain concepts as a unified whole, when they were not always, such as sexual and romantic orientation.

Need for More Fluidity

Several participants discussed how part of their overall coming out experience was the change in the labels they used to describe their sexual and romantic orientations. P2 described the experience as "(diving) into the murky depths of trying to understand what I'm feeling and thinking. And … allowing my understanding of myself, rather, to be in flux has been the most important part of this process." P1 shared that as they explored more options for their identity, even outside the split attraction model, they found that "I'll just drop the Ace label. And then I felt after a while, I don't know how long it took me, but after a while I felt. Sort of freer. More free in my identity." However, they were only able to get to that point by exploring their identity outside of the comparatively rigid

boundaries of society's norms, particularly as they do not identify with a sexual orientation of any kind, only a romantic orientation.

In addition to exploring different labels in general, several participants also discussed how it was important to be mindful that labels can mean different things to different people. P7 shared that a former partner of hers described it as "Maybe your experience and my experience don't match up and that's ok. You're a lesbian in every way you want, you know." However, to allow for such things, one has to accept that societal norms, as they are currently expressed, are not always correct.

P11 summed up both aspects of this, stating "You don't have to fit perfectly into these little boxes, it just has to work for you, and be a handy tool that helps you explain yourself to other people, or just feels good to yourself." They went on to say, "It's just a word, and it could change … and I'll feel like I have a better understanding of my experiences and I'll want to use a different one. All these things are flexible and they're made up!"

Need for More Granularity

In addition to a lot of the thinking associated with sexual and romantic orientations needing to be more fluid in some respects, several participants also noticed areas where more granularity in society's view could help to increase overall understanding and acceptance. Specifically, increased recognition of the difference between attraction and libido, and attraction and behavior.

P3 discussed how "even though at one time I was very sexually active … I started feeling like it was more, 'Am I doing this because I want to, or because it's what expected of me?'" P12 shared a story about trying to explain the difference between

libido and attraction to someone at a party, "he was like, oh, it's like quantum physics. And I'm like what? And he's like, yeah, it's just like. Something I don't understand. I know it exists, just something I really don't understand." P10 had a similar story about having to explain the difference between the behavior of having sex, libido and attraction to her mother

> it doesn't mean I don't have sex. It just means I don't feel the need to have sex with a particular person … the urge to scratch an itch is different from the urge to have sex with that particular person.

> P7 discussed how this difference can be even more important for partners of

asexual alloromantic individuals to understand. She shared that for her "if I have sex with someone I'm romantically inclined with, it's just because of sex drive. It's not because of sexual attraction, and it's not because I think my partner is physically attractive."

Reason for Coming Out

Nine of the participants shared their reasons for coming out to their loved ones. Those reasons broadly fit into the subthemes of feeling pressure of some kind to come out to their family, or because they wanted to share an important aspect of their identity with those that they care about.

Family Pressure

Feeling pressured to come out could take several forms for various participants. For some, like P8, it was related to wanting to reassure their family, "They were like, we've never met someone who's your age who's never had a romantic relationship … how are we at this point, and you're not hitting any of these adult, adult landmarks." She was also open about how if "I wasn't their daughter, I wouldn't. They wouldn't be my

first choice to say, 'it's time to come out to them,'" further emphasizing that it was only because she felt pressure to reassure her family that she had elected to come out to them at all. P4 explained how she came out to her family partially to let them know that they did not have to worry about her, or what she was not telling them, and partially because "I'm out to like strangers, why shouldn't I be out to one of the most important people in my life, which is my twin brother."

However, for others it was because they were coming to realize that the difference between their sexual and romantic orientations was causing problems in their relationship. P6 discussed how when telling his ex-wife he felt that, "Because sex was a problem in our marriage, I, I kind of wanted to. I felt like she deserved to know that it was, it was not her." He also shared that he felt similarly about his most recent relationship, stating "I was dating someone and we were, and I was really attracted to her and it was mutual. And she was starting to desire physical intimacy. So, in that sense, I kind of had to tell her." P2 echoed the idea of the discordance causing friction in their relationship, "I don't have the need for companionship even when I was in a, uh, monogamous relationship … It was more of a friendship with benefits … It got messy," which then prompted them to develop a better understanding of themself and their own sexual and romantic orientations.

While it was not necessarily something that prompted their coming out, both P3 and P13 discussed how their partners had been with them while they had been exploring their sexual and romantic orientations, and while they indicated that the effect it had on their respective relationships was minimal, P3 did state that "she assures me it's fine, but I still feel guilt that I don't feel the urges."

Sharing Something Important

While some felt that they had to come out to their loved ones, others approached it more as wanting to share an important aspect of their identity with people who were important to them. While P5 acknowledged that she had told her ex-husband due to some of the friction in their marriage, she had told her family because she enjoyed "Being able to share with people. It's like, any new information I find out, it's like exciting to me." P12 discussed how they would like to come out to people of their choosing because it is "Something I discovered about myself, and I think it would be nice for them to know it." P11 was open about how her reasoning for coming out had evolved over time, and was now in a place where she had "gotten more comfortable with different identities, coming out has become more about this is an important part of my identity, and you're important to me, and I want you to know about this." While this is a very different reason for coming out to others than feeling pressured to do so, it also highlights that desire for understanding, acceptance and support discussed earlier.

Summary

This study asked the question, "What are the lived experiences of coming out for adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations?". Using IPA, a number of themes and subthemes emerged. These themes were the need for acceptance, the importance of education, the role of societal norms and reasons for coming out. These themes will be further explored in the next chapter, as well as limitations to this study and possible areas for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study aimed to use phenomenological research, specifically IPA, to study the lived experience of adults who identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations and have come out to others. Coming out is frequently a very stressful time for LGBTQ+ individuals, often more so when one's identity is less well-known (Wadsworth & Hayes-Skelton, 2015). While there is some recognition of discordant identities within the LGBTQ+ community, it is only recently coming to attention within research, and there is a lack of current research looking at coming out with discordant identities.

Several key findings came out of the semistructured interviews used to conduct this study. Participants were looking for who they felt would be understanding and accepting of them and their identity when determining who to come out to. Participants also discussed the role of educating themselves in helping to promote understanding of themselves and the role of educating others in both making it easier to come out to them and to get the acceptance and understanding they were looking for. Adjusting societal norms in a more flexible direction in some areas, and a more granular direction in others, was also discussed by a majority of participants. Finally, many participants discussed their reasons for coming out, whether feeling some kind of pressure from family or desiring to share something important about themselves with the people who were most important to them.

Interpretation of the Findings

Discordant sexual and romantic orientations are a potential confounding variable in studying asexuality (Zheng & Su, 2018). In addition, previous research has found that individuals who identify as transgender or otherwise gender nonconforming have a

higher rate of discordance. These demographic trends were reflected in the current data, as all participants identified as either asexual or aromantic, and half of them identified as trans or gender nonconforming. In addition, those who identified as aromantic, as opposed to asexual, did not identify as either heterosexual or homosexual, showing support for the research done by Galupo et al. (2015), which indicated that plurisexual individuals were more likely to identify with discordant identities.

Previous researchers discussed the importance of support in coming out, particularly as it relates to factors that influence decisions about coming out (Klein et al., 2015) and the health of LGBTQ+ youth (Grafsky, 2018). The fact that all participants interviewed cited the importance of feeling like someone could understand and accept them as an influence in coming out to them, as well as those who stated that they were choosing not to come out to loved ones because they felt doubtful that there would be that sense of support, supports this research. This was particularly true for those who felt that their families were conservative, or who lacked the cultural understanding for their identity.

Wadsworth and Hayes-Skelton (2015) previously established that having sexual orientations that were less well-known was related to an increase amount of stress for LGBTQ+ individuals. Although no participants addressed this point directly, the number of participants who shared that they either felt more comfortable coming out to individuals who were likely to already have an understanding of their identity, such as other LGBTQ+ people, or were less likely to come out to those who would not understand, does seem to correspond to this idea. It also relates to the idea of increasing education about discordant identities making it easier for people to come out. This also

supports the findings of Klein et al. (2015), who discussed how they had found the availability of support to be a significant factor when deciding whether to come out. Similarly, several participants shared that being open to fluidity in their own identity was an important part of their ability to recognize the discordance between their sexual and romantic orientations, echoing what Wagaman (2016) had previously found.

While many things that were found in previous research were confirmed within this study, it was interesting to note that, despite being told that the purpose of the study was to explore coming out with discordant identities, many participants also defaulted to sharing their coming out experience about one of their identities, typically the one that seemed to be most important to them. While this was often their sexual orientation, for some it was their romantic orientation, or even their gender identity. This was even true for those participants who discussed the split attraction model (AVEN, 2021b) by name and its relevance in helping them to have language to describe their experience, or even realize that it was their experience. This may indicate that the cultural bias towards assuming that sexual orientation and romantic orientation are the same is so deeply ingrained that even those who know they are different on such a deep and personal level cannot help but use language that reflects otherwise.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of the study was that all participants identified within either the aromantic or asexual umbrella. This could have affected responses to some of the questions, particularly related to how well known their identities were, and how that related to their coming out experiences. Additionally, it is difficult to say if the results obtained will be transferable to individuals whose experience of discordant sexual and

romantic orientations do not include asexuality or aromanticism, such as someone who identifies as bisexual heteroromantic.

The majority of participants were from North America or Western Europe. So, while there were participants from around the world, it is still difficult to say for sure if the experiences noted within this study will hold true for other cultures or regions, particularly those who were not represented within this study at all, such as African cultures or Indigenous/First Nations cultures.

While use of mindfulness practices helped in monitoring researcher bias, it is still possible that there was some bias in either the questions asked or the analysis. This could have resulted in data that were skewed, or otherwise inaccurate, and therefore nontransferable.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation for further study would be for future research to include, or possibly even target, those who identify outside the asexual or aromantic umbrella. It will also be helpful to gain more participants from around the world, in order to determine more of how culture affects the experience of coming out, particularly in light of some participants noting that not every culture conceptualizes LGBTQ+ identities in the same way.

Another potential future direction would be to more directly compare the experiences of coming out among individuals with discordant sexual and romantic orientations to existing models of coming out to see if those models cover the experience of those individuals, or if a new model needs to be created.

Additionally, doing research to validate the split attraction model created by the LGBTQ+ community could be beneficial. While such concepts have appeared in the research previously, the split attraction model is one that, by that name, has grown organically within the community. It is a useful model for explaining discordant orientations, and therefore validating it could help future researchers interested in studying this phenomenon.

Implications

Positive Social Change

Bringing more attention to the fact that orientations can be discordant has potential for positive social change. As previously established, when identities are better known, it also increases individuals' overall acceptance in society. This in turn allows for a greater likelihood of coming out growth, as defined by Brownfield et al. (2018). This can be incredibly important on an individual level, as coming out growth is also positively associated with increased mental health. Additionally, many participants were open about how the lack of education in the general population affected their decision to come out, including not being out to their family due to what they perceived as a likely lack of acceptance about their identities. While there is no guarantee that greater understanding on a societal level will influence acceptance on an individual level, it might make it easier to find others who are accepting.

Additionally, several participants shared that they had not considered that they might be experiencing discordant sexual and romantic attractions until after their exposure to the idea that it was possible, often through the split attraction model. This, combined with many participants sharing how it was important to them to share such an

important aspect of their identity with their loved ones, indicates that having that understanding of themselves was an important part of their personal journey regarding their identity. Therefore, this research may give others the opportunity to question their own experiences and come to a new, deeper understanding of themselves.

Recommendations for Practice

As previously mentioned, one of the primary ethical principles of the counseling profession is beneficence, defined by the Code of Ethics of the American Counseling Association (2014) as "working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being." Without having an understanding of some of the complexities of how individuals experience attraction and orientation, it is possible that counselors will invalidate their clients' experiences by trying to fit them into a framework the counselor is familiar with. Therefore, it is recommended that counselors educate themselves on discordant orientations and how that discordance is experienced, and noticed, by individuals. This will allow counselors to validate their clients' experiences in such a way as to promote overall mental health and well-being.

Additionally, several participants shared how part of their journey in understanding their own discordant orientations was the problems that discordance was causing in their relationships. Therefore, when clients are presenting in counseling due to relationship issues, whether for individual or couples counseling, this may be an area for counselors to explore with them. While it will not always be the source of the issues, when it is, counselors can help clients explore what this discordance would mean for them both individually and within the context of their relationship.

Conclusion

The concept of experiencing sexual and romantic attraction differently is a relatively new one in current society. However, despite the concept being a new one in that context, it is one that has been acknowledged in a variety of ways throughout time and is experienced by roughly 10% of the population in modern times. Coming out with discordant identities is very similar to coming out with any other LGBTQ+ identity, in that it can be a time of great stress, or a time of growth. Many who experience discordant orientations state that they are mostly looking for acceptance and understanding from their loved ones, and that is a key factor in the decision of whether or not to come out. However, the general lack of awareness can make that understanding difficult to come by, and even lead to rejection.

It is therefore vital that counselors and counselor educators be aware of this phenomenon, and what the overall experience of coming out is like and what it means to individuals, in order to best help support clients who may be going through this process themselves. Without that awareness, counselors can become another source of distress and invalidation, instead of support and understanding.

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Appendix A: Social Media Notice Requesting Participation

Hello! For those who don't know, I am a doctoral student working on my PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision. I'm looking at the experience of coming out with discordant, aka different, sexual and romantic orientations. If you're an adult who identifies with discordant orientations and has come out to at least one person as such, I would love to ask you a few questions about the experience. If you're interested, please fill out the form at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/11Iy4o0wee95k9lT-jkNdJ4H0MSWhZR-F8a8GUv2SHRc/edit, and I'll get in touch with you about the next steps, including emailing you an informed consent document.

Appendix B: Flyer Notice Requesting Participation

Hello! My name is Kayla Mangen, LCPC, I am a doctoral student working on my PhD in

Counselor Education and Supervision at Walden University, under the supervision of Dr.

Felicia Pressley. I'm looking at the experience of coming out with discordant, aka

different, sexual and romantic orientations. If you're an adult who identifies with

discordant orientations and has come out to at least one person as such, I would love to

ask you a few questions about the experience. If you're interested, please fill out the form

at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/11Iy4o0wee95k9lT-jkNdJ4H0MSWhZR-

F8a8GUv2SHRc/edit, or use the QR code below, and I'll get in touch with you about the

next steps, including emailing you an informed consent document.

Appendix C: Interest in Participating in Discordant Sexual Orientation Research

Please complete this form if you are interested in participating in a doctoral research study on
coming out with discordant sexual and romantic orientations.

* Required

1. Are you over the age of 18? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Yes

   ( ) No

2. Do you identify with discordant sexual and romantic orientations (Having sexual and romantic orientations that are different from either such as asexual panromantic. Using the split attraction model to describe your sexual and romantic orientations)?
   *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Yes

   ( ) No

3. Have you come out to at least one other person as having discordant orientations as described above? *

   Mark only one oval.

○ Yes

○ No

○ Maybe

4. How did you hear about this study? *

_____

5. If you heard of this study from Discord, please provide your username and #.

_____

6. If selected to participate in the study, what email address can the researcher use to contact you to schedule the interview and send informed consent documentation? *

_____

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me how you identify culturally.

    a. Generational (age)

    b. Race/ethnicity

    c. Religion

    d. Other cultural backgrounds that you consider important to you

2. Tell me about how you identify in terms of both your sexual and romantic

    orientations.

    a. What do these orientations mean to you?

    b. How do these orientations affect how you feel you fit into the larger

        LGBTQ+ community?

3. When did you start to notice that your experience of sexual and romantic attraction

    were different from each other?

4. Share with me your experience of coming out.

    -- easiest part

    -- hardest part

    -- feelings

5. What were you experiencing in your life that made this the right time to come out?

6. How did you decide who to come out and when?

    -- What qualities did you look for?

    -- What influenced your decision about when and who to come out to?

7. How did the experience of coming out align with your expectations?

8. Everyone's experience of coming out means something different to them, what did your experience mean to you?

> -- self affirmation or sharing your sexuality with others

9. What was the most important thing you learned, about yourself or someone else, because of your coming out experience?

10. What is important for you to share about your experience that we didn't ask specifically?